

REVIEW

## **Franz-Xaver Erhard und Thomas Wild: *Drumze – Metamorphoses of the Tibetan Carpet***

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The catalogue of the Tibetan carpet exhibition at Schloss Voigtsberg, Oelsnitz in Vogtland, Germany, from October 2021 to December 2022, provides a comprehensive insight into the historical development of the Tibetan carpet weaving tradition. The essays, resulting from fieldwork and source analysis, tell stories of trade and craftsmanship, wool, dyes, and symbols, thus revealing the cultural and technical influences on the weaving tradition.

The survey on Tibetan carpet history starts with the knotting and weaving techniques used in Tibet and said to have roots dating back to the eighth century when Tibetans ruled Kashgar and Khotan. The traditional carpets from the Wangden Valley, for example, exhibit techniques reminiscent of carpets found in tombs along the southern Silk Road from the fourth–sixth centuries (p. 9). The *tsukdruk* technique resembles those of ancient Central Asian weaving traditions dating back to the sixth–third centuries BCE.

Moreover, in the Tibetan technique “a unique feature has been preserved that has been documented in ancient Egypt used since 200 BCE” (pp. 17–8). The Chinese influences, on the other hand, probably only increased during the Ming, and even more during the Qing Dynasty, when Tibet was under the suzerainty of Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–96).

In contrast to these ancient origins, the travelogues offering additional insights into the carpets (*gdan*), start in the seventeenth century with the Jesuit Ippolito Desideri, followed by the US explorer William Woodville Rockhill and Younghusband in 1904. Interestingly, German literature also embraced Tibetan carpets when Else Lasker-Schüler, an expressionist avant-garde poet, wrote “Ein alter Tibeterteppich” (“An old Tibetan rug”) in 1910.

Original Tibetan sources referring to a carpet called *gdan grum tshe* on the occasion of a statue’s consecration are older and stem from the thirteenth century. In this context I would have liked more information on the terms *gdan* and *grum tse*.

The following chapters illustrate the regional weaving traditions with their specific features and describe monastic and secular carpets. Commonly, carpets from the Wangden Valley, the *wangdrum*, for example, feature designs knotted at the border, such as the swastika, running dog, pearl, and the famous T-border. The carpets often incorporate medallions that are still found on monastic and secular carpets today, a symbol likely to have been introduced from the northern Silk Road (p. 28). The Meldro Gungkar tradition is characterized by mainly red and yellow colouring, while weavers in the Nyang Valley employ a more varied colour scheme while adhering to traditional patterns. The Nyang Valley shares a deep connection with the Azha, with the weavers of the village of Nesar tracing their lineage back to them. The historian Tāranātha (1575–1634) mentions that the oldest carpet market is situated in this territory. An oral narrative recounts the origin

of the patterns of the Wandrum: a Geluk lama wove a rug with various symbols as a meditation seat. According to the weavers' code that this story preserves, only men are allowed to weave carpets since the religious symbols are deemed "too potent for women" (p. 31). Monastic carpets include tiger-skin imitations and tantric rugs depicting human skulls, skeletons, and demons. More common are the long, thick, simpler sitting carpets for the monks in the main assembly halls, and the square carpets for high-ranking monks or abbots, called *khagangma*. Their materials, design, and colours represent three main traditions: one in Lhüntse near the Indian border, one in Meldro Gungkar north-east of Lhasa, and one in the Wangden region.

The oldest secular carpets, the *khamdrum*, are produced in Khampa, a village on the route to Calcutta via Kalimpong. These blue rugs, used as floor seats or bedcovers, often feature religious motifs such as medallions, swastikas, endless knots, and double daggers. In contrast to the monastic tradition, women typically weave these carpets in their borders displaying stylistic flowers and meanders, with pearls as a secondary border. The Khamdrum style remained prominent in Central Tibet until the twentieth century. The trade town Gyantse was another weaving centre influencing rug styles in the region south of the Yarlung Tsangpo.

During the time of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, Tibet saw innovations in carpet production with synthetic colours and cotton warp expanding the colour spectrum and patterns. Designs lacked traditional borders, featuring geometric figures such as checkerboards and medallions and Chinese motifs like clouds, waves, and mountains, the dragon and the phoenix, and the Taoist Symbol of the Immortals. The thirteenth Dalai Lama ordered rugs for the government and a backrest for his throne with the dragon as a Chinese imperial symbol. He appointed a fifth rank official to manage the Tibetan carpet production. The innovations of the later finance minister Kabshö Chögyel Nyima (1902–83) were striking. He shifted carpet production from Gyantse to the Barkhor and introduced a new design, the Kabshö Pesar, which was dominated by flowers.

In the final section, dedicated to carpet history since the 1990s, the authors distinguish between Lhasa carpets, China rugs, Indo-Tibetan and Nepalese-Tibetan carpets (p. 49). Political circumstances significantly influenced Tibet's carpet production, such as the 17-point agreement in 1951 leading to Chinese involvement after a Tibetan delegation had visited a carpet factory in Beijing. Chinese weavers were invited to Tibet to introduce new knotting techniques, and new carpet factories were founded in Lhasa. The weavers organized themselves in guilds. The carpet factory, simply called *rumtak*, served the Tibetan government's purposes. After the flight of the fourteenth Dalai Lama to India in 1959, the factory was turned into a socialist textile factory, but shut down during the Cultural Revolution. Only in 1972 did it begin to reproduce carpets for export. Private manufacturers established carpet factories, weaving products for export. Supported by NGOs, the Wangden weavers created new products, such as car seats.

In India and Nepal, Tibetan refugees established carpet training centres and factories, supported by the Moravian missionaries' global networks. Designs remained largely traditional but the Moravians also ordered Christian symbols, such as the Lamb and Flag on a tapestry. In Nepal, the Austrian Peter Aufschnaiter (1899–1973) supported Tibetan weavers to enable them to earn a living. New designs, adjusted to European taste were developed, exemplifying the "metamorphoses of the Tibetan Carpet" which continues today.

The publication, available in a German and a revised English version, combines field research, oral history, historical sources, and literary studies. With historical photographs, 41 colour plates of carpets from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries, a glossary of Tibetan and English terms, and drawings of weaving techniques it provides an excellent survey of Tibetan carpet tradition, and also contributes to Tibetan studies on material

culture and lexicography. The English version omits to translate “Schlinge” as “loop” in the drawings of the weaving techniques, a small flaw that does not detract from its overall merit.

Considering the tremendous changes on the Tibetan plateau, this study appeared just in time to preserve oral knowledge and ancient techniques.